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DISTRACTION IN SECONDARY WORK IN LATIN

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The recognition recently made by scientists of the value of the study of the classics, and especially of Latin, as a preparation for scientific pursuits, is but one of many indications that the position of Latin in our schools is in no danger of serious attack from without. But there is, I believe, ground for apprehension of danger arising from within, in the overzealousness of those who assert that it is the study of superlative importance in the high-school curriculum, and then strive to maintain this position by the further assertion that this one study can, and should, and does teach most of the arts, sciences, and virtues.

The following list will be recognized by readers of the *Classical Journal* as by no means an exhaustive enumeration of the subjects to be included in a four-year Latin course: to begin with, not only a language and a literature, but an observational science, with independent investigation if possible; then history, archaeology, art, mythology, ethics, logic, rhetoric, geography, topography, military tactics, dramatics, civics, Latin grammar, of course—two to four hundred pages of it, with ever-shifting and ever-increasing categories; English grammar, that more elusive and indefinable thing called English, even English versification. With every issue of the *Journal*, the list grows.

But while the subject-matter of the Latin course has expanded in so many directions, and perhaps our knowledge of it—for, although we secondary teachers have to wince at the numerous references to our inefficiency, there is the occasional admission of better preparation—still in the daily work of the classroom we are dealing with three factors that do not expand. These factors are the capacity of the pupil to master facts and assimilate suggestions, the time given to the study, and the actual amount of Latin read. Perhaps the modern child can do more in the way of unconscious assimilation than his

predecessors. Surely modern methods of training up to the high-school age ought to give him increased power in this direction; but even more surely this same training has not increased his power and his will to memorize and to master facts—and a certain amount of this is still inevitable and salutary. As to the time given to Latin, that is still in most schools only five forty-minute periods a week for four years, and the time that can be given to it outside of school hours, owing to the demands of other studies and the encroachment of outside interests, is probably decreasing. And this stationary time-factor renders practically impossible any great expansion of the third factor, the amount of Latin read. In the majority of schools it is certainly not much more than that ordinarily prescribed for college entrance, less than four hundred pages all told—a dangerously narrow foundation, even when firmly laid, on which to rear a lofty superstructure of the composite style of architecture above indicated.

Moreover, it is assumed that this small amount of reading, not more than could be comprised in one good-sized volume, can develop the ability to write continuous and even periodic prose—a result one would not hope to achieve from such limited reading in the easier modern languages.

The attempt to carry out so varied and ambitious a programme in the limited time at our disposal is attended with serious risks pedagogically—the risk of discouragement on the part of the conscientious teacher and pupil, and of pretentiousness on the part of those less conscientious; and if by enthusiasm and honesty one escape these two, there is yet a third, which it is the purpose of this paper to present—the risk of neglecting, in the teaching of a classical language, the noble and everlastingly valid classical principles of repose, proportion, restraint, definiteness, and of fostering a tendency to wandering thoughts and desultory habits of work by distracting aims and methods.

This tendency to distraction affects both teacher and pupil, and, I am inclined to think, learned editor as well, and is the more difficult to guard against because it is in harmony with the spirit of expansion and complexity so characteristic of the age in which we live, and because it is closely allied to certain pedagogical principles, sound in

themselves, but perhaps overemphasized at present—the principles of relief, of enrichment, of correlation.

Greater definiteness and restriction in the amount and character of the reading to be done seems neither possible nor desirable; indeed, one may well ask whether there is not need of greater expansion and diversity in this direction. It is with regard to the amount of grammatical knowledge to be mastered, and the amount of knowledge of related subjects to be absorbed, that we teachers of secondary Latin stand in sore need of advice what not to do. Professor Johnston told us several years ago that we must not make the little girl cry, and has more recently given us the cheering assurance that a little syntax really goes a long way. But how much? Must it, can it, include a knowledge of all the usages in the Caesar and Cicero read, or are there, even in preparatory Latin, some things that break through syntax and escape? And must it include the ability to name and classify these usages as well as to understand them? And, if so, what names are we to use—the old, or the new, or both, including those about which learned editors differ or to which they refer guardedly as the “so-called” dative or ablative of this or that?

I am afraid my own teaching of Latin was dominated, perhaps vitiated, for years by the fact that I found, in one of the first sets of college-entrance questions I encountered, the direction, “Classify all the ablatives and subjunctives in this passage”—the passage being a page of Cicero. Now I am beginning to hope that, for a while at least, until we return or advance to surer ground in the matter of terminology, college-entrance boards may feel that such a demand would be indiscreet, and likely to embarrass the reader as well as the writer of the paper.

To be sure, Professor Rolfe in a recent number of the *School Review* expresses a sort of grieved surprise that the average college freshman fails to distinguish between the ablative of manner and the ablative of attendant circumstance. The distinction, he says, is obvious. But is not the corresponding distinction equally obvious in English? Then why comment on it if a correct rendering shows that it is understood? In English, French, or German a bridge might fall with a mighty crash, or the winds rush forth from their cave with a mighty roaring of the mountain, with never a note to divert

one's attention from the interesting fact. But not so in Latin. For unless the names of constructions be forced upon a student's consciousness out of season as well as in season—that is, in the reading-lesson as well as in the grammar lesson—there is grave danger that he will merely feel their force and not the sweet reasonableness of this or that label. Again in English, French, or German one may act according to one's usual custom, without having one's motive unpleasantly scrutinized and commented upon in pedagogical journals. It seems almost indelicate not to grant the same privilege to those wretched women and children stretching forth their hands from the walls of Bratuspantium, especially at so critical and harrowing a juncture.

Grammatical terms there must be, and perhaps more for ancient than for modern languages; but why so many more, when the shades of thought to be expressed are no more numerous or subtle? Many a grammatical term that is meaningless before the usage it names is understood from the context, becomes useless after the usage is understood, except, possibly, for a college-entrance examination, or for college specialization in Latin syntax.

If during the present syntactical interregnum we can send pupils to college who will not, save by accident, blunder in accidence and the four concords, who can name and apply in the writing of short sentences some twenty or thirty principles of syntax in addition to those given in every beginners' book, and who can grasp, and adequately render, even if they cannot name, the further usages they encounter in their reading, we may feel reasonably certain that they will neither be denied admission nor ignominiously flunked at the end of their first semester; and, what is more important, that they will be able to do their college reading with a fair degree of ease and appreciation.

Such limitation of aim in the matter of syntactical knowledge and terminology would render possible its relegation to the grammar lesson, and with a wisely edited school text ought to free the preparation of the reading-lesson from at least one element of distraction—the distracting system of grammar references, and the still more distracting system of cross-references. The conscientious student who looks up all his notes is, like poor Mettus Fufetius, torn asunder, distracted, to use Livy's term, mind and body, by the four-horse team

of grammar, preceding notes, vocabulary, and introduction, until he quite forgets what he is reading about. Small wonder if one pony occasionally seems to offer a safer and pleasanter means of reaching one's destination! Grammatical help there must be, and abundant help. But why can it not be given directly? It is not a pleasant or helpful thing, when one is interested in one passage, to be invited to stop and look up another; nor is it always quite clear to the youthful mind why one should have to lose one's place and forget the beginning of a sentence while hunting for necessary information in another book, when a word or two, the suggestion of a preposition or auxiliary, a few words of translation, would probably give all the help needed. It is still less pleasant and helpful to be forced to look up a reference that gives no additional information at all, but merely a label, in return for the labor of turning over leaves and the interruption to one's train of thought. I believe the average schoolboy's disinclination to look up notes which, under pretense of helpfulness, try to force upon him information which he does not want or need at that particular time, is pedagogically justifiable, and due, in part at least, to an instinctive respect for his author's continuity of thought and his own. And it is rather futile, after deliberately depriving a passage of its freshness and force by such unnecessary disintegration, to try to restore these artificially; for instance, to call upon the fifteen-year-old reader, struggling with the first chapter of the *Gallic War*, to observe "how the Latin plays upon the position of words to produce all sorts of shades of rhetorical emphasis;" and, later in his course, to demand a conscious and conscientious thrill whenever Cicero and Vergil drop into rhetoric, by exclaiming, "Note the forceful anaphora, or asyndeton, or chiasmus, or oxymoron!"—strange creatures encountered nowhere else in the high-school course.

If the relegation of definite grammar study to the grammar lesson seems likely to burden unduly that part of the work, time and effectiveness might be gained by discarding in elementary prose-books, also, the time-honored system of grammar reference, and perhaps the modern system of text reference as well, and giving the necessary information topically and methodically in connection with the sentences in which it is to be applied.

It would seem that a prose-book could not, from its very nature,

be very distracting. Yet I have seen one recently in which there is a most seductive collection of parallel quotations from Latin and English authors, designed apparently to relieve and enrich a review of declensions and conjugations.

Such diversions are, however, rare. It is in connection with the reading of the classical authors in our over-edited school texts that this question of distraction is most serious. And here the more difficult part of the problem is to decide, not how much syntax is essential to the understanding, but how much related knowledge is essential to the appreciation of an author. It is not syntax, that is mainly responsible for fifty-six notes on the first chapter of Caesar, for eighty pages of introduction and one hundred and sixty pages of notes on about half as many pages of Cicero's text, for eighty-two notes on fifty lines of Vergil. The value of enriching and vitalizing school courses is self-evident; but there is at present such a tendency to overemphasis in this direction that it is a distinct relief to find in the *Journal* editorial comment on the young "doctors of philosophy who are doling out random bits of erudition to somnolent classes;" and to read and ponder, even if one cannot wholly subscribe to, Professor Lodge's sweeping utterance: "It cannot be too strongly emphasized that the habit of making the classics the occasion for instruction in ancient history, life, and art is fundamentally wrong." One must, I think, assume that Professor Lodge does not mean to advise that the teaching of the classics be entirely deprived of these sources of quickened interest and broader outlook so naturally and inevitably connected with them, but that the question he means to raise is, not whether they should be taught at all—that seems hardly an open question—but to what extent and how.

These questions must of course be decided by the individual teacher according to his own judgment, his own tastes as a scholar, and the conditions under which he works. But I believe that the editors of most school texts, in their endeavors to help the teacher in this respect, really hamper him in his effort to make his teaching definite and effective, and to develop in his students habits of concentration and continuity, by giving too much extraneous information, and by obtruding it upon the student's attention in the wrong way and at the wrong time.

As to the amount of related information to be imparted, it may well be asked whether a student needs or can assimilate more detailed information, more of the minutiae of scholarship in connection with his Latin reading than he needs for his English, French, or German reading. Perhaps the greater remoteness of the subject-matter demands that he be told more of the Roman art of war while reading Caesar than of modern warfare in studying our own Civil War, more of the Roman constitution while reading Cicero than of the English while reading Burke. But I doubt whether he needs more exact information as to the most effective combination of long and short syllables at the end of a period for declaiming Cicero—if he ever gets time to declaim Cicero—than would be required for declaiming Macaulay. And I feel quite sure that he does not need to be told on his first introduction to Orgetorix that the name is sometimes spelled “Orcetorix” on Gallic coins; or, in connection with the attack on the Helvetians at the river Saône, that the best bacon was brought to Rome from this neighborhood. Even the omnivorous erudition of the Germans, which we are striving to emulate, would, I think, hesitate to introduce into the notes of a school edition of Schiller’s *Thirty Years’ War* in connection with the treaty that marked its close, any reference to the superior flavor of Westphalia hams.

But whether as much information or as little information as possible be given, it is certainly important that it should be given at such times and in such shape that it will be a help to the student and not an interruption or distraction. The notes to be used while he is struggling to comprehend a passage should contain all that is immediately essential to its comprehension, and nothing else; all other matter should be relegated to topical introductions or reviews. Perhaps much of it might better still be relegated to special editions for the teacher’s use, to be given to the student orally, with the freshness and impressiveness of apparent originality and spontaneity, or wisely withheld when obviously intended only for teachers or other scholars. A boy who finds in his notes directions to read certain passages of Sallust, Tacitus, or Diodorus Siculus, or even to look up a back number of *Hermes* or *Jahrbücher für Philologie*, is very apt to conclude that the notes are not for him, and either to ignore them altogether, or to waste valuable time and eyesight in finding out what

is meant for him. Many a school commentary might be profitably abridged by the observance of the very obvious principle that a schoolbook is designed, not to show, save incidentally and inevitably, the learning of the author or editor, not to refute the views of other authors or editors, not even to instruct the teacher; but to help the student, and to help him not only to acquire knowledge, but to form habits of mental concentration and continuity. And unless the editor in his editing, and the teacher in his teaching, and the student in his studying, refrain from "this way and that dividing the swift mind, and hurrying it in different directions and making it consider every possibility"—unless we decide which is the better course, and follow it unswervingly, even if so doing means abandoning some things that are dear to us, we shall not bring our classic gods to the high school, or found a city of scholarship that shall endure.